

Good morning, members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

My name is Brook Smith and I am a first-year at Yale College. I'm here today to speak in strong support for **S.B. 184, An Act Extending Through November 8, 2022, Several Changes Regarding Election Administration as a Result of COVID-19 and Concerning Eligibility to Vote by Absentee Ballot**. This bill would make the pandemic an acceptable excuse for requesting an absentee ballot for the 2022 midterm election, following similar decisions for 2020 and 2021 elections in Connecticut. The recent spike in COVID-19 cases is still fresh in our minds, serving as a reminder that the pandemic is still very much present and constantly changing. We do not know what the state of the world will be in November; for that reason, it is critical that voters are given the autonomy to vote in whatever manner will best serve the health of both them and their families in 2022.

As much as we all wish the pandemic would end, it has still yet to relent; the Omicron variant is far more contagious than any variants we faced in the early stages of the pandemic, and the new BA.2 variant is 30% more transmissible even than Omicron. COVID-19 is unpredictable and can mutate and resurge at any time; it is crucial to have measures in place to protect the electoral process if the pandemic rears its ugly head again in November.

Our society relies on mutual trust, and it is of the utmost importance that voters can trust their legislators and their fellow voters to keep them safe as they cast their ballots. Restricting voting mostly to Election Day will increase the volume of voters coming in and out of precincts, and there is real risk associated with such density of bodies—Contact tracing in Wisconsin following the April 2020 Presidential primary identified at least fifty-two cases of COVID-19 associated with in-person voting, with a substantial increase in cases in the weeks following the primary, specifically in the localities with the highest density of voters waiting in lines and moving in and out of precincts. Justice for high-risk voters, including Black and Brown voters and senior-citizen voters who suffer disproportionately from COVID-19, requires giving them **AND THEIR FAMILIES**—as the slight change in language surrounding the “illness” excuse in S.B. 184 would allow—the option to vote from the safety of their homes rather than risking their health to vote in-person.

Furthermore, Connecticut has successfully allowed pandemic-excuse absentee voting for the previous two elections; fewer than 1% of absentee ballots were rejected for any reason, and there was no significant increase in credible reports of voter fraud. In fact, conservative think-tank The Heritage Foundation identifies only twenty cases of judicially proven absentee ballot fraud in Connecticut since 1988, with **NONE** of them taking place since the start of the pandemic. It is abundantly clear that there is no reason to force voters to cast their ballots in person during this time of such strong uncertainty.

I ask you to support S.B. 184 and provide equal access to the ballot for all, regardless of their comfort level during the pandemic. Senior citizens, immunocompromised voters, Black/Brown voters, low-income voters, and any voters who are just afraid of contracting COVID-19 at the polls deserve to participate in the midterm election—and every election, for that matter—without feeling as if they must risk their lives to do so, and absentee voting will provide all Connecticut voters with that comfort. Please, favorably vote this bill out of the Government Administration and Elections Committee so that every voter can feel safe exercising their Constitutional right to vote this election season. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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